

RESEARCH OFFICER SPEAKS ON THE DROUGHT
AND SOME OF ITS EFFECTS

Dr. A.A. Burbidge, Research Officer in charge of reserves management, gave the following talk on A.B.C. Radio on November 12, 1969:

"We all know that there is a drought at the moment and I would like to comment on two aspects of the Department's policy which are a direct result of the drought.

The first is the decision that there will be no duck shooting season this summer. The reason for this is easy to understand when you realise that most waterfowl in the south west did not breed during the past winter. Ducks utilise temporarily flooded areas for breeding and this type of flooding did not take place last winter.

Many types of wildlife appear to be able to forecast weather a lot better than can man and apparently our ducks are among them. This is shown by the fact that they did not begin to breed at the beginning of winter apparently knowing that the rains would fail and there would be no food for the young. Even the ducks in the South Perth Zoo reacted to this instinct since they also did not breed even though they were supplied with plenty of water and food.

Any good game management programme is designed to allow only the surplus produced by annual breeding to be taken and ensures that there are always enough birds left at the end of the season to breed up to the same numbers. If the number of breeding birds diminishes from one year to the next it follows that fewer young will be produced and in time the species will be so reduced in numbers that total protection will be necessary. If we were to allow duck shooting this summer the duck populations would be reduced so much that the effect would be felt for several years. The ducks we see today are the ones left at the end of last season's shooting and under normal circumstances they would have bred up last winter. If shooting takes place as normal there will be a much smaller breeding stock next winter, and consequently less ducks to see and shoot the following summer. The shooting pressure this summer would be even greater than normal because the ducks are highly concentrated on the little available water and there would be few areas to which they could escape. To sum up, by not having a duck shooting season this summer we are ensuring that future seasons are as good as those in the past.

One aspect of this which will worry some farmers is the problem of maned geese (or wood duck) on farm dams. Occasionally these ducks become so concentrated that they foul up the water. If this happens the farmer should contact the local fauna warden who may give him permission to disperse the birds.

The second problem I want to discuss is the policy of not allowing stock to be grazed on fauna sanctuaries. This policy was laid down by the Western Australian Wild Life Authority and was recently confirmed by the Minister for Fisheries and Fauna, Mr. MacKinnon. A similar policy is held by the National Parks Board and the Forests Department. The Wildlife Authority has among its members three farmers and they all supported the policy.

The reason is that grazing is not compatible with the conservation of our flora and fauna. Grazing by sheep or cattle can cause damage to natural bushland in a variety of ways, notably by direct damage to plants and the trampling of the soil as well as the fact that the stock would be competing with the native animals. Nature is always in a state of balance and the introduction of foreign species into a system always produces violent changes. These changes are likely to be more pronounced in a time of drought when the native flora and fauna are already having a hard time.

Anyway, most reserves are not suitable for grazing stock. Native plants provide poor quality food for ruminants and grasses are usually absent. Most natural bush contains a high percentage of poisonous plants and there is usually no natural water.

Fauna sanctuaries are owned by all the people and the decision not to allow grazing on them is the result of weighing up the vast damage that would be caused to these public owned lands against the possible short term advantage to a few people."

